

AESTHETICS AND STYLE IN STRATEGY

ADVANCES IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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ADVANCES IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT
VOLUME 42

AESTHETICS AND STYLE IN STRATEGY

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1. Introduction 'The Aesthetic Turn in Strategy: Creating Value with Style'

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FOREWORD

It is a significant coincidence and a propitious auspice that the publication of the ASTM 42 volume is devoted to the role of aesthetics and style in management. The volume marks the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus movement, born in Dessau (Germany), which had among his key representatives the likes of Klee, Kandinsky, or Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus founder. The Bauhaus was an artistic and social movement that played a crucial role in taking aesthetics and design into everyday life worldwide. When Hitler took power in Germany, a diaspora of Bauhaus pioneering thinkers (Gropius, Van der Rohe, Brauer, among others) moved to United Kingdom, United States, and Israel. The circulation of the founding fathers made the vision and practices of the school spread all over the world, attracting several acolytes. The followers were able to learn the lessons of modernity, marrying beauty with soberness, functionality with form. The influence of this movement was strong, triggering multiple and unexpected outcomes across a variety of industries and domains. The Bauhaus left a profound imprint on the labour market, shaping a generation of painters, designers and architects, and disseminating its footprints in the activities and products of scores of design-driven companies, contributing to the appreciation of style as a canon of practice across a wide variety of organizational endeavours.

Over the past decade, organizational and management scholarship has been paying increasing attention to the domain of aesthetics, related to judgements of style and beauty. Strategy scholars have exposed the central role of design choices for coupling function and aesthetic form to fuel competitive advantage, and design-driven innovation has emerged as a distinct category to evoke the combination of form and function in product market settings. This scholarship has taught us that great strategies have great style. They thrive on the dual aesthetics of the poetry of the image and the prose of numbers. They stem from long term aesthetic commitments that shape the whole organization, its vision, workforce and operations, upstream and downstream the value chain. If we asked a group of design experts to name a bunch of companies that are a good representative of this aesthetic commitment towards marrying business and beauty, they would probably mention such iconic brands as Herman Miller, Apple, Alessi, Vitra, Bang & Olufsen, Swatch and others. What do these companies have in common? I think what they share is the devotion to a stylistic canon.

By canon, I mean a combination of rules, principles and practices that inform the company's organizational routines and strategic choices. With no ambition to comprehensiveness, I wish to highlight 4 features of this canon – first, the use of repositories of styles. The careful creation of a collection of artifacts and objects, ultimately called the museum, is almost invariably a distinctive feature of aesthetically oriented companies. Corporate museums are not primarily conceived for the visitors, who usually are very few and sometimes do not even pay the ticket, but they are working spaces for absorbing, codifying and diffusing

the insights springing out from the collections. The Vitra museum space, for instance, is central to encircling employees into an aesthetic atmosphere that imprints itself on the company identity. At Alessi, the ‘museum’ is a working space for the articulation of new projects and the sedimentation of old ones into the organizational memory of the company. Second, the relentless search for and cultivation of designers and other aesthetically inclined creative talents. An exemplar in this respect is ‘the tea and coffee award’ by Alessi, a competition among artists to design a tea and coffee cup, eventually produced in limited series. The goal of the contest is not the product, but the identification of talents to recruit. The care for talent is complemented by great emphasis on space, ambiance and atmosphere. Swatch deliberately deploys a small team of creatives in iconic cities such as Venice, New York, Milan renowned for their aesthetic appeal. Third, a strong aesthetic culture which is often nurtured through collective rituals that unite people in the pursuit of beauty. In these contexts, professionals often work in ‘clan-like’ organizational structures that are kept together not only by the materiality of their working life but by their passion for higher pursuits, reflecting a urge to be surrounded by the aesthetic sensations of beauty, not as a substitute for the rigors of analysis but as a property of them. Fourth, a strong focus on the ‘flagship store’, typically designed by archistars, to convey symbolic meaning and identity claims. The store encapsulates the company style and makes it easily referable to the company image. At the same time, it is a purveyor of the company aesthetic commitment that has an immediate resonance with its visitors.

Aesthetics shows rather than tells delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perceptual and emotional. Building a stylistic canon requires going beyond the utilitarian rationalization of aesthetics. It requires honouring beauty not only as an instrument of utility but also as a fundamental human aspiration because, as Jim March reminded us, ‘profoundly useful ideas about management and organizations are more likely to come from the playful pursuit of artistry in ideas than from an ambition to be helpful to managers or their social overseers’ (March 2013).

Gianni Lorenzoni